

“Telling tales”: understanding and practising narrative career counselling

Euroguidance Centre Malta in association with MCGA

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Overview

The key note will:

- Consider the place of narrative career counselling within theory and practice
- Discuss the perceived limitations and benefits of applying a narrative approach
- Offer examples of the narrative model as used in practice

The workshops will:

- Provide an opportunity to practise elements of the approach

The plenary will:

- Report on the activities in the workshop and raise questions for discussion

Background to the approach: a need for a paradigm shift?

- Established theory and the narrative turn
- Interdisciplinary collaboration
- Attention to language and context in a changing world
- Narrative - based in social constructionism



Entering a hall of mirrors?

- Constructivism – individual and cognitive (rational)
- Constructivist – interpersonal and relational (emotional)
- Social constructionism - the way our experiences are constructed, in context, rather than determined in advance
- *Psychosocial* – my preferred term for describing the (my) approach



Turning to narrative and biographical approaches – why this, why now?

- Discontinuities in the world of work
- Impact of migrant populations
- Storytelling is universal as a method of understanding
- Narrativity is evident in different communities of practice
- A life ‘story’ as part of considering a life future
- Not about ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’
- Established approaches have their place – at the point of readiness
- Yet, building less ‘reductionist’ models is easier said than done

Constraints to innovation: busyness vs deep listening, stillness & openness

- Attentiveness and time
- The meaning of events
- Dealing with uncertainties
- The reality of targets – constraints –
'safe' transitional spaces
- A playful space
- A need to practise
- Can use parts rather than whole model



From theory to practice

- In 1-1 work, but there are other ways of ‘doing’ narrative work
- Can fit into a staged model for shaping ‘interventions’, e.g. Egan’s 3 stages
- Moving from ‘telling a story’ to identifying patterns and themes - towards career hopefulness
- Patterns – more illustrative and tentative
- Growing body of research evidence of the effective use of narrative in practice
- My own research – 3 projects, in brief

Derived from the work of Mark Savickas

- Savickas, M.L. (2011) *Career Counselling*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- ~ (2009) *Career counselling over time* (Psychotherapy in six sessions video series). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- ~ (2006) *Career Counselling* (Specific treatments for specific populations video series). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.



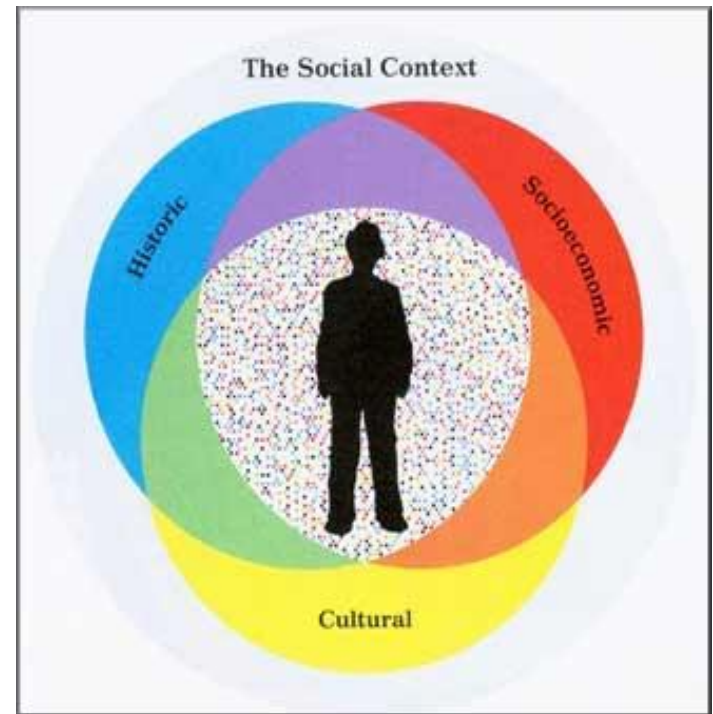
Practical points to consider

- Time, 50 minutes seems average – if also exploring stories
- The need to contain troubling stories
- Not for every client – part of the toolbox – but, not arriving with prepared stories
- The idea is not to replace an existing way of doing things with another exclusive approach – flexibility is key
- Questions need explaining / framing carefully and responses need developing (not a check list) – rapport essential
- Probe the story for the detail, not just naming

the event.

Contextual points to consider

- The need for *psychosocial* understanding
- Cultural preparedness
- Neoliberal discourses around individual resilience, adaptability and employability
- High levels of youth unemployment
- Career as a middle class concept?



“Telling tales”

- What do we see when we look at photos of ourselves as children? We can recognise the place or the new outfit, but there is a sense of separation – how is the child related to who we are now? We recall past events as fragments, but there is also a sense of continuity.
- Who gets to ‘author’ the story?
- ‘NEET’ as an essentialising label



The Narrative Career Counselling model

Practitioners adapted the Savickas approach

Savickas has a systematic approach – ‘fits’ with a 3 stage model, but the language and content differs.

Beginnings – negotiating a contract

- How can I be useful? (not ‘how can I help you?’)
- Tell me why is this important now?
- Explaining the format, number of meetings, note taking etc
- Confidentiality
- Agreeing the topic / agenda

Exploration: “We were experimenting together”

Middles: exploring the story. Using the 6 questions alone (next slide) introduces something new and engaging – you do not have to go deeper.

- A space to play with ideas ... An invitation to ...
- ‘I’d like to try something different...’
- Genuineness and honesty – ‘The reason I asked that question is...’
- ‘It may help us to think about ...’
- ‘How would you feel about having a go at ...’

Exploration: 'pre-occupations'

- Role models when young - 'cool characters' – who did you look up to? Can be a cartoon or TV character, a 'star'. Often a teacher – but other than family (3)
- Magazines / TV shows (other media)
- Hobbies / free time interests
- Books – all time favourites (Films)
- Favourite saying or motto (t-shirt message)
- Favourite school subjects / and those disliked...



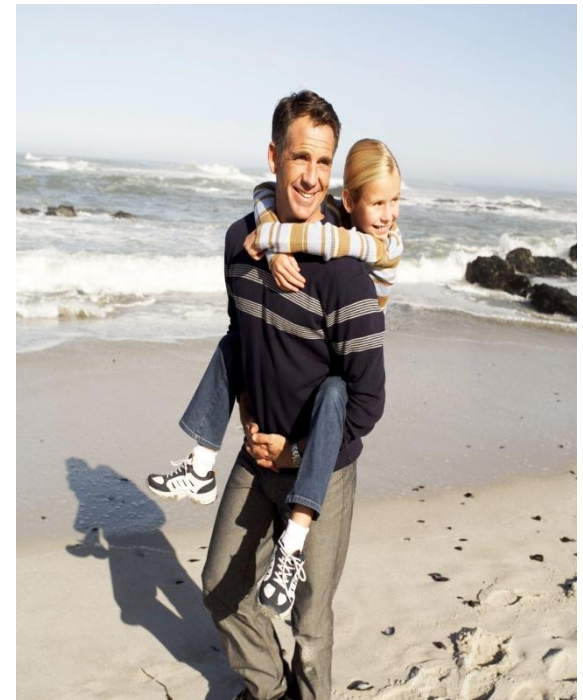
Exploration: ‘rehearsing the problem’

Stories from childhood – if it is helpful to go deeper

- The 1st story – what happened next
- Asking for two more stories
- *The client reflects on the meanings, begins the ‘identification’ by turning the stories into headlines for a newspaper*
- Listen for the first verb – the first things they say – note it down
- Identifying the themes/patterns and together -relating these to potential interests

Endings

- What are the goals that follow – what action is required?
- So, what has been achieved today?



How do practitioners approach the ‘so what’ stage, after the questions and stories?

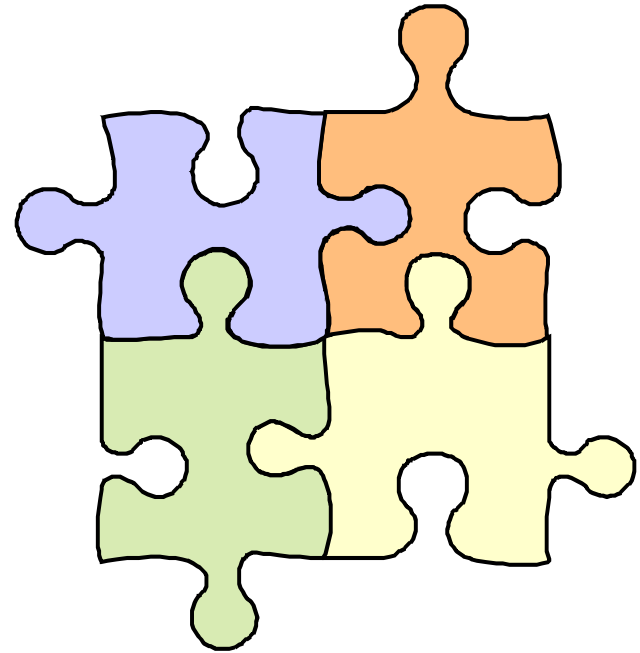
- Questions that encouraged the client to identify patterns and themes
- Not about practitioner’ analysis
- Headlines – noting verbs
- Using silence
- Remember it’s not “tell me all about your childhood”!
- Flexibility and adaptability.



Follow up - can be 'phone/email

Following a period of reflection – putting it all together,
including the reality check

- What did we get wrong?
- What are your current reflections?
- What are the goals – are these different now?
- What further action is required?
- How will that be reviewed?
- What else needs to happen?



Comments

Practitioners:

- A powerful way to get young people to think in deep and unexpected ways
- Gets to the root of the indecision and leads to more positive outcomes

Clients:

- Yes definitely useful, given me lots to think about – opened my eyes
- Wow, I've never thought of that before – **and it all came from me!**

How do the questions and stories lead to clues for career designing?

1. Opening statement and counselling goals
2. Early recollections – *pre-occupation* that illuminates the life theme – they are what the client needs to hear now
3. Favourite saying – elaborates the life theme and relates to the current problem
4. First story and role models – connect the issue to a potential solution
5. Role models – to understand specific characteristics and qualities the client uses, can use
6. Overall stories suggest areas for career development – hearing advice to self
7. And how do these link with potential next steps?

Positioning within a narrative approach, along a spectrum

- Narrative/story
- Meaning and identity
- Constructivist
- Slow time / play
- Emotions /empathy
- Subjective *biographicity*
- Opening up space for creativity
- Targets and Outcomes
- Behaviourism / focus
- Realist
- Fast time / seriousness
- Cognition / logic
- Objective distance
- Instrumental – ‘what works already’

In a career we try to...

...'actively master what we passively
suffer.'

How does this relate to my story, I asked
myself?



References

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